

'Real World' English: A Report on Chukyo Students in Singapore

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Introduction

Chukyo University's Department of World Englishes has established as a part of its curriculum, a class that includes a three-week study tour that will be required of all the department's first year students. Following a term-long class at Chukyo, three groups of about 32 students (one in August, one in February and one in March) will travel to Singapore with a Chukyo teacher to study English each academic year. The two authors of this report first met in Singapore in 2000, during Japan's Golden Week. Richard Morrison traveled with Professors Sakai and Fukuyoshi of the then Department of English Language and Literature, to Singapore to participate in meetings with Mr. Foo Chee Jan and Mdm Chin Soo Fun of the Language Teaching Institute, at the Regional Language Center (RELC) to discuss the feasibility of this idea. Richard Morrison later taught classes and spent 3 weeks in Singapore on two different occasions with two groups of Chukyo students that served as trial runs. They have since participated in various other meetings both in Singapore and Japan.

The work that has already been done on behalf of our students there has left us with nothing but positive impressions. We wish to share the reasons why in this report. We believe the sharing of information can only help us all reach a better understanding as to why and how Chukyo students traveling to Singapore now plays an important part in the new Department of World Englishes' curriculum. With that said, we will be sharing our impressions of RELC's role in collaboration with Chukyo University's English language curriculum. But first, here are some thoughts on why Chukyo is sending students to Singapore.

When people began to talk about a study trip to Singapore, the most commonly asked question (primarily from Japanese people) was, "Why Singapore?" The answer to that question can be most simply put by saying that because Japan is a part of Asia, and because English is an official language of Singapore. Having Chukyo students travel to Singapore on a study trip will provide an opportunity for them to come in contact with their Asian neighbors and perhaps more fully realize their Asian identity in a safe place that does not require

a major crossing of time zones. Those reasons, combined with the fact that Singapore is closer than other English-speaking nations makes it an ideal place to introduce Chukyo students to the idea of studying and learning abroad.

When one goes to Singapore, one will come face to face with a very multicultural society. In today's multicultural societies, the language most often used to communicate between peoples of differing languages is English. And this holds true for Singapore as well. In addition, an Asian predisposition for deference and quiet which is quite different from some western countries, can lead to a possible lowering of the students' inhibitions. Meeting and talking with other Asians, much like themselves, can be especially advantageous for Japanese students when so many are so reluctant to speak out. On a recent trip to Singapore, 15 students from Chukyo University found themselves coming face to face with other Asians, literate young people, immersed in a materialistic culture, eager to improve their English skills in order to become contributing members of society. The positive result was that there was much communication, in English.

The Regional Language Center (RELC)

The home of the Regional Language Center's (RELC) Language Teaching Institute (LTI) is Singapore, the place where Chukyo first year students will be staying and studying. English education is the mission of RELC. RELC was established in 1968 as Singapore's contribution to the South-east Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO). At the time, the primary goal of the center was English teacher education.

The Language Teaching Institute (LTI) was established in 1977 to provide facilities for the upgrading of the English proficiency of government officials, professionals and students. It has also provided member countries of SEAMEO with programs for upgrading the skills of language educators. The Center, through its Specialists' Department (SPD), also assists the member countries on programs, projects and activities in the interest of improving language education in the region. LTI and SPD have separately and in cooperation provided activities such as language testing, education and administration, and English education for a variety of groups, including high schools and universities from Japan.

RELC English Education Programs

The Center's programs, listed below, focus on English language learning. One of the more relevant and interesting programs at LTI is the English language teaching to a continuous stream of foreign students, especially those from China. They consolidate their foundation in English before joining the Singapore secondary schools, polytechnics and technical institutions.

Presently, the LTI receives students from China to prepare them for the Institute of

Technical Education (ITE) that will train these students for work in the field of electronic engineering and other specialized areas. Their training at ITE will only begin after they have acquired the English abilities required for those classes that are taught in English. Since those students' English is not up to par, the LTI gives them an intensive course in English lasting three months.

The Ministry of Health of Singapore also sends students from China to a polytechnic for the Diploma in Nursing. These students also need intensive English studies to raise their varying levels of English. Before they embark on their studies to become nurses, English classes for these different groups of students involve grammar and general communication and language related to the field of their specialization (English for Specific Purposes). These pre-nursing students are enrolled in a six-month program that entails 900 hours of intensive English education.

There are also a number of fourteen-year old students from seven different ASEAN participants. These "high-flyers" are also offered scholarships to attend Singaporean schools and they take English classes at the LTI to prepare for those classes.

Other programs of the Center focus on English language teaching and strengthening the competence of persons engaged in language research, pedagogy and program administration.

One is a course leading to a Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics conducted by RELC with the degree conferred by the National University of Singapore. The admission requirements are a good university degree and a recognized teaching qualification with at least 24 months teaching experience in a recognized institution. It is a full-time course beginning in July and ending in September the following year. Another course leads to a Diploma in Applied Linguistics requiring a Bachelor of Arts degree or other acceptable qualification in an area approved by RELC and a minimum of 24 months experience in language teaching or in language planning and program development.

There are a number of other Specialist Certificate Courses. A Specialist Certificate in Language Testing provides specialists in the field of testing and evaluation. It is a three-week full-time course conducted once a year in September. Another, the Specialist Certificate in Language Curriculum and Materials Development course builds awareness of the linguistic, psychological and educational principles that govern the design and development of language curricula and materials. The Specialist Certificate in the Teaching of English for Business and Technology provides teachers of English for Business and Technology (EBT) with the skills of program design, materials preparation and teaching strategies.

There are other programs, including the RELC International Seminar, held in April each year. Around 600 participants attend over 120 paper presentations and workshops given by

academics and practitioners from the region and beyond. RELC also provides distance education courses in line with its objectives of promoting competency in English language teaching in the region. The Center offers the Diploma in TESOL (Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages) and Certificates in TESOL to participants in the SEAMEO countries. Language Testing Services are also provided by SEAMEO-RELC in the form of customized language testing in various languages. The tests are designed by RELC and administered by native speakers.

The Center truly serves as a place for increased English acquisition for people from different parts of Asia. Students from Chukyo should now be able to benefit from the expertise and setting that RELC's LTI has to offer.

Chukyo in Singapore

The Language Teaching Institute (LTI) is providing classes for Chukyo learners of English. The first three-week stay for Chukyo students began in July 2001. Participating students attended a one-semester class at Chukyo in preparation for the study trip concluding with the three-week study tour in Singapore.

Students stay together with a roommate in the residential accommodation made available at the RELC International Hotel at special rates for course participants. A choice of a local breakfast or a western breakfast is offered at one of the two restaurants at the hotel and a daily box lunch is also provided as part of the three-week stay. Lunches on weekends and holidays and dinners are not provided so students have to go to town, a 15-minute walk away, to develop confidence and the facility to use English. Refrigerators, safe boxes, room cleaning and a laundry room are also a part of the package.

Opportunities abound at the International Hotel, where the Language Center is located, for interaction with restaurant and cleaning staff, and people at the reception desk. On one evening, a Malaysian cookout (a Satay party) provides an opportunity for the Chukyo students and the 60 plus Chinese students studying there to have fun using English as they get to know one another better. It is a time for people to show off their national costumes. Students and staff join together in the garden where Chukyo's young women wear summer Kimonos (that they have been encouraged to bring) for this event. The young men from Chukyo are given some clothes from the Malay community by one of the LTI teachers to wear. There are songs performed by all the groups. It is an animated evening that is clearly enjoyed by all and the talk continues in the garden long after the party is over.

There are many aspects to LTI that make it a special place. It has well-qualified staff and teachers from various countries. People in Singapore value teachers who can serve as model English speakers. LTI tailors adequate and appropriate programs to meet the needs of participating member countries. So students from Chukyo land and live in a rich learning

environment. Students are able to work and talk together in their rooms at night. As the RELC library is not open to students of the LTI, but only to the RELC professional staff and teacher-educators, a classroom is provided for evening use at the request of the students. A computer laboratory is also open to students six days a week until 11:00 p.m. That all of this takes place in one location makes learning a pleasant experience.

Classes

Upon arriving, there is an Opening Ceremony, an introduction to the course, and orientation to the RELC and the surrounding area. There are classes Monday through Friday totaling six hours a day, minus the breaks. The morning class begins at nine and continues until noon. There is a two-hour lunch break and another class begins at two in the afternoon and ends at five. Students utilize their lunch break and time after classes to send e-mail, to talk with other students studying there, and some take a rest because they are not accustomed to such an intense program.

Students and teachers go out on *Cultural Exposure* day trips to places such as China town, Little India and Malay Village. There are also *Educational Tours* that include trips to Singapore Polytechnic and the National University of Singapore. In both places, they have an opportunity to meet and talk with undergraduate Singaporean students, and they have exchanged e-mail addresses. A trip to the Civic District also takes place. A couple of pure fun, guided activities have rounded off their exposure to Singaporean institutions but this may not continue due to financial reasons. Students welcome the free and easy days they have on one three-day weekend in the summer. The biggest of Singapore's holidays, National Day, can be celebrated then.

An interesting side note is that students from Aoyama Gakuin in Tokyo have students attending classes at the LTI each summer. There are a couple of occasions inside and outside the center for Chukyo students to meet and interact with other Japanese students.

Curriculum in Singapore

The course in Singapore, as the name implies, the "English Communication Skills Course for Cultural Awareness" is for improving English communication skills of Chukyo students as they learn of other cultures in Singapore. It is a study tour where, as a sign outside a Canadian office at the RELC says, communication (with the LTI teachers, staff, other RELC students, and Singaporean residents) adds value to information and knowledge. The LTI has been putting together a course that has been designed to meet the needs of Chukyo students and we would like to see that continue. If Chukyo teachers offer other curriculum ideas to the people at the LTI, and if the people of the LTI would then like to include these, that would seem like a good step, as there will always be steps of change to be made towards

improvement. We look forward to continuing the excellent work already demonstrated in the two Chukyo-LTI programs.

There are some specific parts of the curriculum at the LTI that are worth noting because of their importance, beginning with one that we think is very important. When this course was originally being planned, one primary benefit to students discussed was the idea of providing students with opportunities for meeting other Asian students. That has already resulted in successful outcomes and any further steps taken to further institutionalize these opportunities, we think, will only meet with greater success.

In fact, we believe accompanying teachers from Chukyo will need to be pro-active in helping to set up the opportunities to meet the Chinese students (or any other students) studying English at RELC. While RELC has set up the Satay Party and Friday afternoon walks to let the students from different cultures interact, only with facilitation and encouragement from teachers working together, can we help make the lengthy lunchtime another opportune time for such interactions.

The Chinese students are very forward and polite, seeking out people from other countries to ask and learn of life outside China. The interest in Japanese students from Chinese and Singaporean students is very high and Chukyo students relish the attention once they are engaged in regular meetings with those students. And the Chinese students serve as an excellent model for Japanese students because they are almost always talking among themselves in English. For Chukyo students, visiting the Chinese classrooms during lunchtime and seeing and hearing them speak English can be a real eye-opener. The Chinese students describe themselves as having a "hungry spirit." We hope Chukyo students can develop that spirit.

It does require some time and effort, such as modeling from teachers. Joining in also is a plus. We have seen that the initial idea for this type of interaction has already met with a great deal of success and could be one of the most important contributions that can be made while accompanying students to Singapore. In fact, in a report to Chukyo faculty after the first two trips, it was recommended that Chukyo teachers report on the successes of this aspect of their trip. We need to continue to look for ways to improve these opportunities and share them with one another and between institutions.

On another topic, orientation and access to the computer room will remain a priority, as using English over the Internet has become an important part of Chukyo students' program in Japan. We would also like to suggest that linking our students to their classmates (those still in Japan or other places in the world) would enhance this real use of communicative English. But that is work that should be done in Japan prior to trips being made. Chukyo students are accustomed, as are their teachers, to communicating by e-mail and we should utilize this opportunity.

The pragmatic consideration of students being orientated to the hotel trolley-bus, and bus and subway systems can be very useful in teaching independence and will continue. Making that part of a class syllabus in Singapore, where students might be required to accomplish some tasks using those different modes of transportation, could be very fruitful.

An experience of one student who ended up in the hospital partly due to dehydration is also a rich learning opportunity. Teaching students about the need to drink lots of water regularly could prove useful. Discussing the relative safety of the drinking water coming from the tap would be interesting and would help wash away the possible misunderstanding held by Chukyo students that safe tap water is only found in Japan.

The three different types of trips outside of the classroom have all proven to be appreciated by Chukyo students. One type of trip, called the *Educational Tour*, where students go on different days to two educational facilities, the Singapore Polytechnic and the National University of Singapore, are rich opportunities for Chukyo students to see and meet other Asian students. One of the best results has been that Chukyo students have met and become friends with these students and some of those friendships have become strong and are continuing. Another type of trip, *Cultural Exposure* (the guided tours with their teacher for Cultural Awareness), along with their class work, has received high praise from students. These trips, without a doubt, included as part of the curricular package for this study-tour, offer many opportunities for learning.

The last type of trip is one that students seem to enjoy immensely. Going to special spots such as The Jurong Bird Park, Sentosa, and Night Safari has been a definite highlight for Chukyo students. While we understand that this part of the trip may have to be cancelled because of financial reasons, it will be a sad loss for the students.

Conclusion

We hope that some of these reflections shared here might serve as some useful markers for Chukyo students studying and learning in Singapore. We believe that the idea of having students improve their English skills while having fun is met when students have the freedom to explore and negotiate with people in Singapore on their dinner outings, weekend trips and other evening outings. But perhaps more significantly is that Chukyo students are able to meet Chinese students studying at the language center. The Chinese students have eagerly sought out the Japanese students, inviting them to their apartments across town for lunch, dinner, walks, swimming and of course talking. The friendships made with Singaporean students are also excellent opportunities for communication in English. The purpose for studying English becomes very clear quite quickly. It shows students from Japan that English is an Asian language used for real communication. We hope that the inspiration gained by Chukyo students remains with them as they continue to realize that

English is truly a world language. This report, part of the results of the group research done by Professors Sakai, Fukuyoshi and Morrison on the 'Possibilities of World Englishes Curriculum', funded by Chukyo University's Kyodo Kenkyuhi (Group Research Fund) points out the successes of Chukyo students studying in Singapore. And we also hope that this report has contributed to a better understanding of why and what Chukyo students are studying in Singapore.

With this as part of the overall program, the College of World Englishes will take Chukyo University well ahead into the future. Japanese students' inhibitions of using English as a means of international communication will be a thing of the past.